

Prickly pear cactus is dying from dry weather in Shortgrass Country. Liveoak leaves around Mertzon hang dry and lifeless; the number two invader next to mesquite, juniper cedar, shatters at the slightest blow of boot or stirrup. And the glorious pests of all, the mesquites, spread and thrive as if dehydration was their maternal sap.

Drouth is nature's leading hit man, a natural destroyer of man, his beasts and his flora. Dry weather brings on a slow death. The bare topsoil bakes down deep into the subsurface. Far beneath the ground at the water table of abundant flow, sands trickle into muddy drops. Windmill wheels safe for 40 or more years rattle loose in the gales and wrap around the tower's stem. The only living and vibrant thing left on the ranch is the expense column.

As the dead grasses are swept away by force of winds swirling with brown dust, the prairie land takes on a grim shade of gray exposed ground, subject to the erosion at hand, and the inevitable floods to come. Old doctors of horses and hollow horns know once weather failure hits to expect strange maladies and terrible deficiencies to develop in their patients. Diseases crop up on ranches where the names of such terrors were never known except in the ranch manual on veterinary medicine.

Back in the mid-50s, the Big Boss wintered a set of heifers that became so thin and emaciated, we called in a vet. (In those days, only polo ponies and show dogs were

treated by professionals.) The blood test from A&M College's laboratory ruled anaplasmosis. The disease was so rare in native cattle, the veterinarian refused to believe the test until the heifers became so anemic, the color of the blood turned watery yellow in his test tubes. If any drugstore medicine was prescribed, it would have been news over the whole neighborhood. All the nostrums we used were based on kerosene and bacon grease backed by pine tar oil and sulfur.

Strange, but none of the heifers died or became worse. In March, a month later, the Spring Creek watershed flooded through the old ranch, bringing up pickings short but green along the creek banks. Darned if those heifers didn't heal up and gain back 30 or 40 pounds by the end of April. We kept the cattle until they were 12 years old. Not a hoof ever showed signs of having anaplasmosis again.

Last week, a vet came to the ranch to test the bulls. Before we went to work, he gave the expected drouth report: cows down from calving, baby calves unable to suck, no milk, retained placentas, broken leg bulls, dust pneumonia, rabies, yellow and white scours, vitamin A blindness, and exciting combinations of several of these tragedies at once.

The testing was slower this year. We have been sending so many bulls to the packing house in Angelo, I wanted the doctor to judge the dressed value of my sires instead of the breeding potential. The market for packer beef looks real good in San Angelo. Two 50-dollar a plate benefit dinners this month were catered by a franchise restaurant. The same

outfit furnished the food for both events. No better prospect can be found for packer grade meat than the franchise trade.

Thirty-five other choices are listed in the telephone book under Caterers, so I guess the winning bid must have lower than the German hot dog chain, or "Little Miss Missy's Chinese Dragon." When the first invitation came, I thought of asking why the committee overlooked "The Yellow Rose" in Barnhart, Texas, a very reasonable source of homemade tamales and home-ground hamburgers.

Next post, the Queen of Heart's Ball promised a gala evening dancing to a husband and wife band and dining catered by the same franchise people. I wanted to go dancing, so I bought tickets. The last time I ate food so tasteless was in 1936 at a Cub Scout merit badge cookout. The steak had been boiled in a pressure cooker and coated with a gray film of water gravy. Huge steamed trays offered a famous dish of bland corn and peas plus collapsed scalloped potatoes topped with artificial cheese. The chicken was a pressed piece of white meat as hard and dry as a writing tablet. Slivered lemon pie completed the meal. I was so disconcerted over paying so much for a \$5.95 dinner, I was unable to keep step with the music for the first part of the dance.

Fine state of affairs, the whole countryside becoming a parched wasteland at the same time the wool capital is becoming as void of taste as a laundromat. The good doctor

gave a favorable report on the bulls. He thinks I may top  
the killer market next season ...